

Sino-ASEAN Geopolitical Relations through International Student Mobility: Manifestations of Soft Power through Education

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Abstract

China has become a competitive player in the global higher education landscape with a growing number of Chinese universities being part of the global rankings. With the significant improvement in the quality of some Chinese universities, education as a soft power was deployed by China toward ASEAN countries. This strategy was particularly evident in PRC Ministry of Education's appeal to Chinese universities to serve the nation's diplomatic strategies. This paper puts into perspective Sino-ASEAN people-to-people exchange and institutional linkages in the aspect of education. Overall, the article examines the intersections of soft power, geopolitics, and student mobility as situated in the Sino-ASEAN context. Through secondary data analysis, the trend of student mobility from ASEAN countries to China was traced. The results reveal that the ASEAN student outflows to China have been gradually increasing. By strategically accepting more ASEAN students to Chinese universities, China assists in the development of ASEAN's human resources and continues to be perceived as a partner in the region's development.

Keywords: China, ASEAN, International Student Mobility, Soft Power, Chinese Diplomacy.

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1. Introduction

There has been a shift in the outflows of students in Asia specifically in the context of higher education. In Asia, most international student outflows are projected toward universities in developed countries, primarily in the West. The reason for this motivation of students in preferring North American and European universities was partly precipitated by the need to strengthen knowledge transfer, national capacity building, and the thrust for modernization (Chan,2012). Countries such as India, China, South Korea, and Malaysia have been strongly involved in the aforementioned form of student mobility. However, this trend is gradually being disrupted as some universities in Asia have actively maintained a globally competitive profile, thus attracting students within the region.

This phenomenon stems from the influence of globalization in the realm of higher education. Giddens (1991:64) argues that globalization is “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” In a similar vein, Dreher, Gaston, and Martens (2008: 15) illumine that globalization is “the intensification of cross-national interactions that promote the establishment of transnational structures and the global integration of cultural, economic, environmental, political, technological, and social processes on global, supranational, regional, and local levels.” Therefore, this fosters a form of worldwide interconnectedness encouraged by flows and movements of language, ideas, technologies, people, and finance in real time. It can also be perceived as a trend that points towards a “world system and ‘one worldness’” (Marginson, 2014:16). Despite being framed for the most part on the macro level, globalization does have a considerable effect on the regional level and, subsequently, in the field of education. For example, it paved the way for the formation of organizations such as ASEAN University Network – Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) and European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It also facilitated a competitive race among universities to reach certain performance metrics which is then ranked by various agencies e.g. Times Higher Education World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings.

Globalization tilts the power relations among nations even in the area of education. In essence, globalization has a great impact on universities, which are “among the most globally sensitive of all human institutions” (Marginson,2014:16). Marginson (2014:16) further illumines:

In higher education and other spheres, it is marked by the growing role of the global dimension of action, including global spaces, systems, agencies, and products, and by the impact of global systems and phenomena in local and national affairs. Sometimes, the global pushes aside the local and national dimensions. Sometimes it does not, so that the global coexists with the local and national, and seeps into daily life and ordinary common sense.

In the Asian context, such a movement forced higher education systems to rethink the way they operate and reconceive their position in the global system of knowledge production. As an example, Collins et al. (2014) reveal that Singapore’s public universities were corporatized. Specifically, higher education institutions were assumed to transform themselves into entities that are entrepreneurial and align their practice with industries that are knowledge-based. Consequently, universities were also expected to produce a significant amount of research, improve global reputation, and invite foreign talent. Universities in East Asia also faced some changes in responding to globalization. This includes improving research output and moving up in the global university rankings. As a case in point, in 2009, the combined scientific paper output from China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore accounts for 80% of the total number of American output (Marginson,2014). More recently, China has outranked the United States in terms scientific publication quantity (Tollefson,2018; Koshikawa,2020). Hallinger (2014:236) illumines that high-profile competition among institutions of higher learning drives interest in global university rankings and research productivity is one of the key metrics in rank improvement. Consequently, the increasing competitiveness of universities in Asia has become a potent pull factor to attract international students.

Due to the changes made by certain universities in Asia and other peripheral nations to improve their operations in terms of teaching, research, and student recruitment; the race to be part on top of the global ranking has disturbed the status quo. Waters (2012) opines that the rise of countries such as China, India, and Brazil have unsettled center-periphery relationship of international knowledge systems. Specifically, some universities in

developing countries have considerably drawn nearer to their ideally envisioned institutions as situated in the global context. Consequently, the original trajectory of student mobility from East to West is now changing through the “regional dynamics around international mobility (as more students begin to move within Asia and Asian countries become ‘hosts’ to international students)” (Waters,2012:127). Simply put, new patterns of mobility have emerged in Asia due to the emerging socio-economic developments in the region. Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and China “have shifted from an exporter of mobile students to an emerging importer” (Chan,2012:218). It is quite apparent that student mobility in Asia manifested noticeable changes in how universities operate, revealing new rationales, strategies, and motivations in the area of education vis-à-vis globalization. Unlike in the previous decades, the focus on the West for international education is being gradually reshaped and dismantled with the inclusion of emerging players through countries such as China and Singapore (Chan,2012).

China has been one of the countries that send a great number of students to universities to other countries. Prazeres (2013) notes that China dominates this aspect of student mobility with 343,126 students abroad, compared with the US with 191,321 students and India with 123,559 students. Historically, China has been a leading source of international students abroad. With the policy of opening up; since 1978, the number of Chinese who studied abroad is over four million (Wu and Wilkes,2017). Despite being a top sending country for international students, China has also started to absorb quite a number of international students (Jiani,2017). ICEF (2016) points out that China has signaled an interest in the growing international student market in Asia. Subsequently, major destinations for ASEAN students who seek international education go to the US, UK, and increasingly, China. This is further exemplified by China’s growing foreign student enrollment, with a yearly increase of 10% from 2006 to 2015 (ICEF,2016). Jiani (2017) notes that China in 2015 has accounted for 8% of the international student market, which is ranked third for international college student intake after the USA and UK.

As a strong emerging competitor in the international higher education market, China is using its position to recalibrate its relationship with neighboring countries. Essentially, China is using education as a form of

soft power. As defined by Nye (2004), soft power is the ability to influence through persuasion. Primarily, “soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies” (He and Wilkins,2018). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, the scholarships offered by China paved the way for the growth in the number of international students in the county. In 2017, for example, China granted scholarships to 58,600 students from 180 countries (MOE,2018). Yang (2012) illumines that China is attempting to project itself globally primarily through education and culture. Likewise, its global influence is further projected through educational exchange and collaboration, which is evident in the ASEAN region. Chinese leaders are aware of the need to sustain this contact with ASEAN countries and one effective way is through the dramatic expansion of Confucius Institute in the region. Rabena (2020) illumines that Confucius Institutes are a significant facet of China’s educational, cultural, and public diplomacy; these are institutions that project Chinese soft power. It is therefore evident that higher education is deemed one of the most “systemically planned soft power policy” of China (Yang,2012:487). This strategy is effectively summarized by the statement of the ASEAN-China Center Secretary-General Yang XiuPing that “foreign students from Southeast Asian countries are the bridge and future of the relationship between ASEAN and China. We want to see more exchange students from ASEAN countries in China” (ICEF,2016).

Focusing on ASEAN as a regional bloc, such is composed of ten countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Overall, the region has a combined population of 600 million people with a rising middle class (ICEF,2016). Therefore, the ASEAN region is seen also seen as an emerging market for student recruitment with its noticeable sustained economic growth (Velasco,2020). Ziguras (2017) estimates that there are 250,000 ASEAN students completing degrees outside their home country with China and Singapore as likely destinations. With deeper integration in the ASEAN region, Chan (2012) argues that there will be more outflows of students in the region as they are searching for better educational opportunities and experiences.

Given that China is one of the dialogue partners of ASEAN and is increasingly becoming influential in the region, this paper examines the ASEAN-China people-to-people exchange specifically in the aspect of education. Likewise, China's overseas institutional partnerships with ASEAN countries are also discussed as it is considered to be an interrelated exercise of soft power. This article is framed in such a way that the conceptual intersections soft power, geopolitics, student mobility, and Sino-ASEAN relations are considerably highlighted through the analysis of empirical data. Specifically, this article seeks to answer the following questions: First, what is the student mobility trend from ASEAN countries to China in the period of 2011-2016? Second, how does China's recent education policies contribute to its diplomatic strategies in relation to ASEAN countries?

2. Theoretical Framework

In international relations, countries deploy different forms of power to ensure that their strategic objectives are accomplished. Nye (2004) proposed three types of power: military power, economic power, and soft power. Military power is associated with the behaviors of coercion, protection, and deterrence; such is manifested through threats or even the use of force. Economic power involves inducement or coercion and is manifested through payments or sanctions. Lastly, soft power is associated with the behaviors of agenda setting and is manifested through values, culture, policies, and institutions. Nye (2004) further argues that these aforementioned forms of power can be viewed through a spectrum between command power and co-optive power. Simply put, command power is "the ability to change what others do" while co-optive power "is the ability to shape what others want" (Nye,2004:7).

To synthesize these forms of power, I argue that hard power involves coercive actions which may include military and economic actions. It can be deployed in the form of military intervention, coercive diplomacy, or economic sanctions (Wilson,2008). On the other hand, soft power involves a more persuasive agenda through values, cultures, policies, and institutions. Soft power therefore "encompasses nearly everything other than economic and military power" (Wilson,2008:114). In this article, I focused on soft power manifested through education and people-to-people exchange. Soft power is one of the most important aspects of China's foreign policy. It is

best exemplified through the Chinese “model of multilateralism, economic diplomacy, and good neighbor policy” with key elements such as “culture, values, development model, international institutions, and international image” (Li,2008:295). Lee (2008) contends that China’s soft power is used to transform the current international order and pacifies discontent and fear among its neighbors. With the manifold aspects of China’s diplomatic endeavors, soft power is best observed in education. Blanchard and Lu (2012: 573) affirm that “the realm of education is one in which China has pushed hard to project soft power.”

3. Methodology

To empirically show the trend of student engagement and exchange from ASEAN countries to China, data from the Center for Strategic Studies (CSIS) was analyzed. CSIS, founded in 1962, is a “nonprofit policy research organization dedicated to providing strategic insights and policy solutions” (CSIS,2019). The organization claims to be “the world’s preeminent international policy institution focused on defense and security; regional study; and transnational challenges ranging from energy and trade to global development and economic integration” (CSIS,2019). One of the projects of the think tank is China Power (2017), which provides data on “five interrelated categories of Chinese power: military, economic, technological, social, and international image.” Specifically, secondary data analysis was used to examine the data from CSIS’s China Power. This involves the re-examination of data collected by CSIS. The China Power project of CSIS traced the number of international students studying in China from 2011 to 2016. The analysis of the said dataset allows for detailed consideration of China’s relationship with each ASEAN country particularly in the aspect of educational exchange and international student mobility.

4. Results and Discussion

Through the said dataset, information specifically on ASEAN countries was extracted and further scrutinized. Consequently, the succeeding analysis is divided into three major parts, ASEAN students who studied in China for less than six months, ASEAN students who studied in China for more than six months, and the overall trend. The analysis of these three aspects of China-ASEAN student mobility sheds light on the number of the students coming from ASEAN countries to study in China. It also brings into

perspective some geopolitical issues that might have affected the course of ASEAN student mobility to China.

Figure (1): Number of ASEAN students who studied in China for less than six months from 2011-2016, excluding Hong Kong and Macau

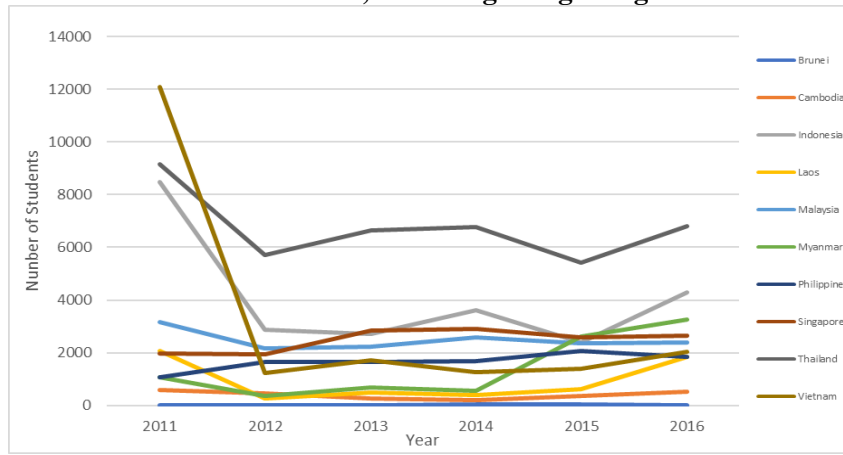


Figure (1) shows the trend of the number of ASEAN students who studied in China for less than six months. As can be seen in the figure, from the period of 2011-2012; there is a decrease in the number of students from most ASEAN countries who have short study engagements in China. Vietnam's number of students drastically dropped from 2011-2012, from 12,081 to 1,242. This was also evident for countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, and Myanmar. On the other hand, Singapore's number of students gradually increased from 2011-2012. For the Philippines, there is an increase in the number of students, and it remained fairly constant. What can be gleaned from this figure is the event in 2012, when the South China Sea dispute increased tensions among the said countries. Interestingly, despite the Philippines filing the case for arbitration, it still has an increasing number of students in China for short duration student exchange, as compared to other ASEAN countries.

Figure (2): Number of ASEAN students who studied in China for more than six months from 2011-2016, excluding Hong Kong and Macau

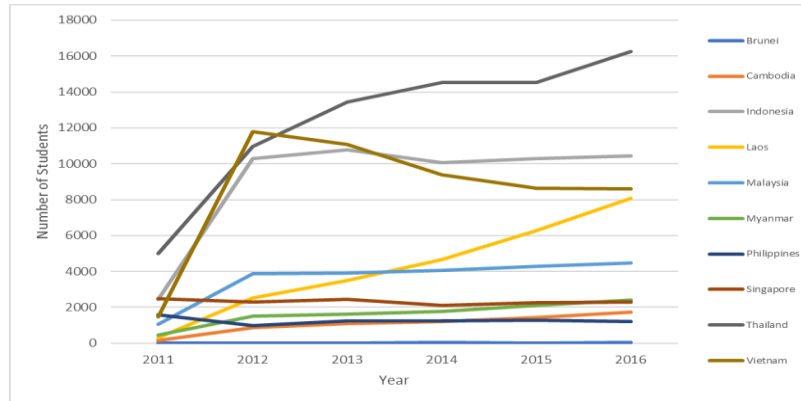


Figure (2) shows the trend of the number of ASEAN students who studied in China for more than six months. More likely, these are individuals who are completing degree programs from universities in China. As shown in the figure, Thailand has the biggest contingent of students in China and it seems to be continuing in an upward trend. Sino-Thai relations particularly on people-to-people exchange continue to flourish. However, the overall trend for ASEAN students in China, for those completing degrees, started to plateau and even decrease.

Figure (3): Total number of ASEAN students who studied in China from 2011-2016, excluding Hong Kong and Macau

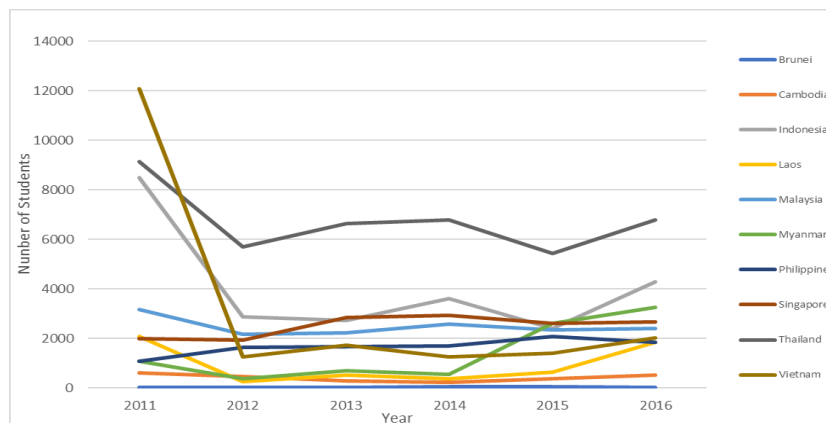


Figure (3) reveals the overall trend of student mobility from ASEAN countries to China for the period of 2011 to 2016. As mentioned earlier, Thailand is the biggest sending country of international students to China. It should be noted that there is a sharp decrease from the period of 2011 – 2012 for some countries, possibly due to diplomatic issues on the South China Sea. However, in 2015, the numbers for most ASEAN countries, have started to gradually increase.

The South China Sea arbitration is a critical moment in Sino-ASEAN relations. As shown in the figures in this essay, there has been a steep decline in overall student mobility within the said period. Welch (2018) made a highly important point in the South China Sea issue vis-à-vis education cooperation between ASEAN and China. He opines:

While regional relations in higher education continue to grow, spreading territorial disputes between China and several ASEAN neighbors (maritime and terrestrial) may constrain regional relations. Ongoing differences over territorial ownership of minor shoals, reefs, and islands in the South China Sea have proven stubbornly resistant to resolution. As late as mid-2017, only an agreement to commence consultations on a code of conduct (begun in 2002) had been reached, a fact ascribed both to China's muscular diplomacy, and ASEAN's inability to achieve a common negotiating position. Further disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea in 2011, that involved sovereignty over Hoang Sa (the Paracel Islands, known in Chinese as Xisha), Quần đảo Trường Sa (the Spratly Islands, known in Chinese as Nansha), and Fiery Cross Reef (Yongshu Jiao) provoked sharp Chinese criticism. Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines all scrambled to boost their defense capabilities and ties, including with Japan, the United States, and India. (Welch,2018:16)

There has been progress, albeit slow, in addressing the South China Sea issue between China and ASEAN countries. Bu and Fan (2016:65) reveal that "China and ASEAN countries signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), demonstrating their commitment to a stronger partnership and mutual trust and peace and stability in the South China Sea. They agreed on the guidelines for follow-up actions in the implementation of the DOC in July 2011." However, developments beyond the said efforts are yet to be seen.

As shown in Figure 3, the number of ASEAN students started to pick up once more from the slump in the 2011-2012 period. ASEAN and China seized the opportunity to improve relations through improved people-to-people exchange. Welch's (2018) term of "muscular diplomacy" is highly relevant in the framing of this issue and is seemingly in contravention from the exercise of diplomacy and soft power. China's use of "muscular diplomacy" is detrimental to its image in the ASEAN region, its forceful and unilateral approach to diplomacy or the lack of it sows discontent and distrust from the ASEAN bloc. However, this sense of distrust from ASEAN countries was progressively mended through acts of goodwill, specifically through educational cooperation and exchange. China's education ministry is cognizant of this possible strategy. In 2010, China's Ministry of Education even appealed to the nation's universities to "serve the nation's diplomatic strategies" (Pan,2013:253).

5. China's Higher Education Policy: Internationalization and the Belt and Road Initiative

China's five-year plans, which is known as "Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development," show how the state seeks to progress through different forms of development initiatives. Wu (2019) traced several five-year plans of China, specifically charting the course of China's higher education. Table 1 shows China's landmark policies on higher education from 1991 up to the present. As can be seen on the table, as early as three decades ago; China has prepared to reform its educational system to be more outward-looking. In the 2016-2020 five-year plan, the higher education system plays a key role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Furthermore, the 2021-2025 five-year plan highlights the role of universities in China's strategic goals by strengthening its 世界一流大學和一流學科 [world class universities, world class disciplines] initiative, which is abbreviated to 雙一流 [double world class]. With the 雙一流 [double world class] initiative, some leading Chinese universities have been positioned to compete with other top-ranked research-intensive universities from other countries (Christensen and et al,2020). This motivation to globally compete stems from the country's remarkable economic growth in the past decades and such "is closely related to the aspiration of Chinese universities to perform [similar to] leading US research universities" (Jöns and Hoyler, 2013:57). Ultimately, the Chinese government has set a target for its 42

universities to be included in the global rankings by 2050 (Benito and et al, 2019).

Table (1): China’s Higher Education Policy Based on its Five-year Plans

Five-Year Plans	Higher Education Policy
1991-1995	Promoting higher education international cooperation and exchange, improving the treatment for returning overseas/returning Chinese students, and optimizing the policies related to overseas studies
1996-2000	Concentrates on exploring new models of running universities and implementing Project 21/1 for developing over 100 Chinese universities into high-level research universities in the twenty-first century
2001-2005	Importing and utilizing foreign education resources, attracting overseas talent and returnees, and supporting overseas studies
2006-2010	Emphasizes the importance of recruiting returning overseas Chinese students and attracting overseas talent
2011-2015	Aims of developing world-class universities and establishing globally influential scientific and technological innovation centers
2016-2020	Aims of strengthening cooperation between China and B&R countries in the fields of education, science and technology, culture, environmental protection, health, and Chinese medicine. China’s strategy of constructing an “education community” with B&R countries through sharing high-quality education resources, establishing the “Silk Road” government scholarship, optimizing the mutual recognition mechanism of academic qualifications, promoting student and scholarly exchanges, further promoting cooperation between higher education institutions, and encouraging Chinese universities to establish joint institutions overseas.
2021-2025	Strengthening the 雙一流 [double world class] initiative through the construction of basic research and collaborative innovation capabilities of colleges and universities, improve the operating conditions of 100 undergraduate colleges and universities in the central and western regions, and lay out and build a number of high-level public health colleges and high-level normal colleges.

Note. Information for 1991-2020 was derived from Wu (2019). Information for 2021-2025 was derived from Center for Security and Emerging Technology (2021).

In the context of ASEAN, China extended its educational presence in countries such as Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand. In the case of Malaysia, Xiamen University opened a campus just outside of Kuala Lumpur. It is considered to be a large “campus with a total gross floor area of 470,000 square meters, represents the largest overall investment (about RMB 1.5 billion, mostly by Xiamen University—which corresponds to over US \$37 million), and is 100 percent owned by XMU” (Guo,2018:9).

Aside from the establishment of Xiamen University in Malaysia, other institutions from the UK and Australia also established overseas campuses e.g., University of Nottingham Malaysia, Monash University Malaysia, and Curtin University Malaysia. China's effort and investment in internationalization yielded substantial outcomes. Chinese universities are gradually being recognized as institutions capable of operating beyond their domestic condition and is at par with other Western-operated universities in the region. As a tool for improving relations and diplomacy between the two countries, the establishment of a campus of Xiamen University in Malaysia is greatly perceived as a "friendship bridge between Malaysia and China" (Guo,2018:10).

The Case for Laos is similar to Malaysia when it allowed a Chinese university to operate in their country. In 2007, Soochow University was allowed to operate by Vientiane. In Thailand, the Bangkok Business School of Yunnan University of Finance and Economics was established within Rangsit University (He and Wilkins,2018). Based on these transnational institutional developments between China and ASEAN, it can be deduced that China seeks to be an active participant in the educational systems of ASEAN countries. Wu (2019:92) argues that the internationalization initiatives of China in higher education is an instrument in improving its global reputation:

It seems obvious that the Chinese government is promoting higher education internationalization as an important initiative due to its increasing awareness of the strategic position of higher education in international relations. Three major dimensions of China's "outward-oriented" higher education internationalization approach, the [Confucius Institute] program, international development aid in [higher education], and [higher education] level international student recruitment, can be regarded as instruments that may enhance its worldwide positive impacts and its status in the world knowledge system.

Overall, this model of setting up campuses abroad has been the strategy of other countries. For example, Malaysia's Nottingham University (a partnership between UK and Malaysia) and Singapore's Yale-NUS (a partnership between US and Singapore) are strategic institutional partnerships which also reveal the level of bilateral trust between two

countries. China is seeking to practice the same strategy as exemplified by its offshore campus developments in the ASEAN region.

6. Conclusion

Overall, China is an emerging country for hosting international education and ASEAN countries are also emerging markets for seeking international education, the interface of the two phenomena opens spaces for further discussion specifically in the area of student mobility. Wells (2014) illuminates that International Student Mobility is changing the higher education landscape. Furthermore, Wei (2013:105) argues, “the mobility of talent (international students) across borders has emerged as an important field of study that various nations and organizations have been attaching great importance to. With the advent of the knowledge economy, talent has become the key driving force of economic development and the guarantee of improvement of national strength.”

Given that Chinese universities are starting to be at the forefront in global university rankings, China has a valuable tool in improving relations with ASEAN countries. In the preceding decade, the top university in Asia has always been a race among China’s Tsinghua University and Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University or National University of Singapore. China can enhance their position in Southeast Asia through its continuous show of goodwill, more specifically, by taking more students from the ASEAN region or by intensifying their initiatives to operate offshore campuses of Chinese universities. He and Wilkins (2018) noticed that this mode of soft power is effective and observed that “China is leveraging its existing soft power to assist or promote its education export, and China’s soft power is returning to Southeast Asia.” Soft power through education has been largely utilized by numerous countries i.e., United States’ Fulbright Scholarships, Australia Awards Scholarships, and UK’s Chevening Scholarships. China has started to implement this strategy by conceptualizing the Silk Road government scholarship as one aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (Wu,2019).

China and ASEAN countries have a longstanding history of relations through commerce, trade, and movements of people. Considering China’s economic upsurge in recent years, it has become an important trading partner of ASEAN countries. However, there are existing diplomatic frictions that are yet to be fully settled. Given that there are certain

disagreements on policy and territory, China can continue using its soft power to continuously coax its Southeast Asian neighbors to initiate further dialogue on issues that are pressing to both sides. Looking at the bigger picture, this is a positive-sum approach to diplomacy. By accepting more ASEAN students to Chinese universities, China assists in the development of ASEAN's human resources. Conversely, China also gains more allies in the region and will be perceived as a benevolent partner in development.

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